

From the Rural Village to the Global Village

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Of all the projects under the umbrella of the Acacia Initiative in Senegal, the Village Land Management and Rehabilitation Project seems best to merit the label 'revolutionary'. This is not so much because of the technical resources employed, but because of its target community — rural people — and the effort to bring information and communication technologies (ICTs) within reach of people generally left out by traditional modernization policies. Three sites in the Tambacounda region — Sinthiou-Malème, Makacoulibat, and Kothiari were selected for this experiment, which is unique to Senegal.

Across Africa, the ICT explosion is causing anxiety that expresses itself more and more in public debate: how to prevent a new gap between North and South, the 'inforich' and the 'infopoor'. The anxiety is justified if we look at the figures for 'connectivity' in various regions of the world, but the issue that receives insufficient attention is the risk that, even within developing countries, a gap may grow between the centre and the periphery in terms of access to ICTs.

This issue is central to the International Development Research Centre (IDRC)'s entire Acacia Initiative, and in particular to the component known as the Acacia/ Grtv Village Land Management Pilot Project. Advocates of shock treatment might have preferred a title like 'Internet in the Village', but this conjures up the kind of wonder generated in village communities by new communication media, and would be at odds with reality. The goal of IDRC and its partners, namely FRAO (Fondation Rurale pour l'Afrique de l'Ouest) and GADEC, is to make ICTs a tool for the improvement of daily life in such varied fields as education, health, environmental management, administration, and so on.

Information gathering

Since the project document was drawn up in February 1998, notes Adama Abdoulaye Ndiaye, who runs FRAO's Participatory Research Unit, Acacia/Grtv has gone through a number of stages. The first, in September 1990, "involved a survey of the situation and an assessment of the technological status quo in the Tamba region, and more particularly at the project sites. The conclusions confirmed the choices we had made, in the sense that the area was shown to be poorly equipped in terms of communication infrastructures, and it accounts for a third of the surface area of the country." The second stage was a meeting in December 1990 of all the key people in the region (department heads, local representatives, peasant organizations, etc.), who pooled their opinions and suggestions on the general thrust of Acacia/Grtv.

This broad consultation led to field studies in February 1999, says Ndiaye, "to work up a participatory diagnosis of existing community information systems. This enabled us to assess the strengths and weaknesses of internal and external communication media in use at the grass-roots level. For example, we noted the central role played by the Tabala (traditional drum) in communication in a place like Makacoulibat, or the role of the weekly market in exchanges of information between people in Kothiari."

Introduction of ICTs

All of the data collected in these various stages were refined in March 1999 during thematic workshops designed to identify sectors where the introduction of ICTs would be appropriate in the context of the project, and others where the right course might be a reinforcement of traditional systems.

The data now gives FRAO a clearer picture of the recipients' expectations and the choices to be made in introducing ICTs into village communities. Ndiaye offers some indicators: "With these new tools, we can give local elected representatives better training in their administrative work, and use data transfer to provide them with information on the management of natural resources (legislation, or studies of forest resources, for example). Computers are equally useful in the health field, offering health officials a way of building a data base on patient consultations, drug inventories and so on." Peasant organizations have not been left out: the project will provide them with a CD-ROM listing all the possibilities for obtaining funding for their activities, and how to get in touch with funding agencies.

Data collection

These objectives demand an enormous amount of data gathering, which is being done by young computer specialists under an agreement between IDRC, the Mathematics and Informatics Department of the University of Dakar, and FRAO. Current surveys cover all institutions (SAFEFOD, Trade-Point Senegal, etc.) that have relevant information and documentation on the target populations for Project Acacia/Grtv.

The results of this research will be incorporated into a model for validation in a series of 'innovation workshops': the next stage of the project. Given that the goal of Acacia/grtv is the establishment of ICTs at the local community level, the second phase will seek to encourage the production of local programming geared to the specific needs of the recipients. Adama Abdoulaye Ndiaye cites, for example, the possibility that local people might produce CD-ROMs of their own on the traditional pharmacopeia, once they have mastered the tools. Is not the high illiteracy rate a limiting factor in such a process? Ndiaye is optimistic. He is counting not only on the experience of GADEC's resource people in the training of local people, but also the effectiveness of such learning aids as CD-ROMs, which in addition to text, will feature generous use of sound (in the national languages) and graphics to improve accessibility for the illiterate.

Local telecentres

The project will run for two years before it is handed over to participants, and will include the installation of telecentres at the three selected sites, equipped with a computer, a modem, a printer, a telephone, and a fax. The telecentres will be managed under an agreement between the managers and the community, and the public will have access to their services at modest cost. The aim is quite simply to use ICTs to make these villages part of the 'global village'.

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